stronger than the tide

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stronger than the tide

by TheSilverQueen

Summary

When Hannibal walks in on Will taking a bath, the last thing he expects to see is that Will has a merman tail.

“Will,” Hannibal says slowly, “do you have something you wish to confess?”

Notes

This is my last minute entry to Cinnamaldeide's #MerMads fest, where we turn Mads's characters into mer creatures! I took this a little literally and had Will actually transform Hannibal into a merman, but . . . my other idea was taking way too long to write. (Maybe next year).

Warnings: There is sex in a bathtub, for starters. Also Will has a uterus in his tail because I happened to be watching some Nemo theory vids and laughed at the idea of mer society being like clown fish where there's a dominant female, so there's mpreg later on. Finally, the transformation is . . . not gory, but not exactly very pleasant. You have been warned.

Title comes from an Allison Ivy quote: "You are stronger than the tide."

Heavy inspiration for the merman form also came from DarkmoonSigel's amazing fic Reflets dans l'eau - if you haven't read it, I HIGHLY recommend it.

See the end of the work for more notes

Hannibal expects many things when he accidentally walks in on Will in the bathtub. He expects Will to try and cover himself, he expects Will to make aggravated noises and curse him, and he even expects Will to make try and flee the bathroom altogether. After all, Will has studiously avoided being completely naked in front of Hannibal for quite a while now, even though it was Hannibal who stitched them both up after the fall. Hannibal has tolerated it for many months now, but today he found himself quite impatient with the whole affair, and so after the water runs for a sufficient amount of time, he walks in on Will.

And finds something quite *unexpected*.

Will – bright red, arms crossed tightly over his chest, soaked through to the bone – has a *tail*.

It is long and sleek, dripping wet even though half of it hangs out of the bathtub, and gleams faintly under the lights in the bathroom. The fins are tapered and translucent, like jellyfish, and the scales are shades of green and blue and purple, blending together in what probably is a perfect camouflage for deep sea hunting. The tail itself is thick and muscular, and comes all the way up to Will's waist, where the vivid colors grow paler and fainter until it blends seamlessly into skin just below where the scar Hannibal once gave Will sits.

Even Will's upper torso has changed. Faint glimmering silver lines crisscross his arms, patterning his veins like liquid metal, and twist and bunch up into strangle symbols all over his chest. Webbing joins his fingers together, and neat slices under his ears hint at where gills must lay.

All in all, it comes together to form a rather stunning conclusion.

"Will," Hannibal says slowly, "do you have something you wish to confess?"

Will hisses at him, like a snake disturbed from long rest, and flicks his tail. Droplets splatter against Hannibal's face, as cold as ice, and when Hannibal licks his lips, he tastes sea salt.

Hannibal tilts his head. "Can you speak?"

Will makes a strange chittering noise. It is neither confirmation nor rejection; it sounds more like grumpy grumbling. Will sinks back in the tub, curling his tail around, and finally deigns to speak.

"I thought you knew," he says, accusation laced throughout every word. "How else did you think we survived the fall?"

"In truth, I remember very little of it," Hannibal confesses. It had been a long fall, and Hannibal had already been dizzy from blood loss and adrenaline. What he remembered after the fall was more like snatches out of a dream: water, like hard ice to break their fall; Will struggling at his side, hands gripping so tight that nails parted skin; waves filling his lungs and pulling at his legs; the moon, spinning wildly overhead as they bobbed in the water, reflected in every wave like slices of light. He'd awoken in a boat with Will at his side and

been too overwhelmed with gratitude to question much of anything else. Pure luck, he'd thought, for them to live.

Will's shoulders begin to lower, slowly. He doesn't appear cold at all – no goosebumps or shivers – so Hannibal can only attribute his tight posture and crossed arms as a defense against an attack.

Slowly, Hannibal sinks to his knees, until they are on the same eye level. Looking at Will's beautiful tail, he can well believe there is a story to their survival that he has not been aware of yet. He wets his lips. "I had thought that we had gotten lucky," Hannibal says carefully, hands visible and steady at his sides. "But now I think that perhaps your secret had more to do with our survival than luck."

Will's tail twitches, rather like a cat's. He sniffs. "Luck had nothing to do with it," Will says haughtily. "I commanded the sea to welcome us, and she did. I commanded the waves to bring us to shore, and they did. I commanded the water to leave your lungs, and it did."

"Did you command me to forget?"

Will raises one eyebrow. "My cousins might be able to, for theirs is the power of temptation and bewitchment," he says. "But my song commands only the waves and the tide and the sea. If you truly don't remember – "

"I don't," Hannibal repeats. "I remember only waves and moonlight and blood. And you."

Will's tail finally unfurls, until it coils over the edge of the bathtub like a limp noodle rather than a tense scaly sword. His arms fall with little plops into the water, and he pushes himself upright again. He stares at Hannibal like he wants to pry his ribs open and feast on his heart, looking for lies like poison in the meat, and Hannibal merely stops himself from blinking and waits and watches.

Finally, Will seems satisfied. He blows out a great big breath and leans back until his head thunks against the side of the bathtub. "I thought you were avoiding me," he admits, soft and quiet like waves at sunrise. "I thought you were . . . repulsed."

Hannibal isn't quite sure what face he makes at that, but it makes Will laugh.

"How could I be repulsed by you?" Hannibal says, because he is not in the habit of lying to Will. "You are beautiful, Will, with legs or a tail. May I?"

Will shrugs. "If you like."

Will's tail is even more beautiful when Hannibal settles down by the bathtub for a closer look. The scales glitter and gleam with each movement as Will breathes, so every second they are a different color. When Hannibal touches one with a finger, he finds the scale cold and hard, like glass, and they all overlap so as to leave no weak spot for predators or enemies. The tail is large enough to encompass both of Will's legs, yet when Hannibal runs a hand across he finds that the muscle is one piece, as if his legs had joined together, bones and joints and flesh melding into one powerful tail. Yet Will is not without defense, for when

Hannibal turns his attention to the fins, he finds them edged with sharp looking spines, black as ink and coming to so fine a point that he cannot truly see the end.

“Are they poisonous?”

Will hums. “Yes,” he answers. “Not strong enough to kill, of course. Just enough to paralyze or to wound. A warning, really. If we wish to kill, we have other ways besides poison.”

Hannibal can’t resist the temptation to touch one anyways, and Will allows it. A shiver runs down Hannibal’s spine as he traces the fine line of it, knowing that Will need only flick his tongue and Hannibal might be paralyzed on the floor from it.

“What causes the transformation?”

“Water. But it’s not . . . without control. I can shower without transforming, for example. It must be sustained contact with water, deep enough to submerge. And once we are grown, we can resist the temptation, if we need to.”

“Are you stronger like this?”

Will smiles, sly and secretive, like a nightmare from the deep. “Would you like to find out?”

Hannibal hardly has time to even think of forming a response when Will rears up like a snake released from a basket and seizes him around the shoulders. His nails sink into Hannibal’s skin, just as they did after the fall, and Hannibal’s entire world tilts as Will yanks him head over heels until he lands ungracefully in the tub, sprawled across Will’s lap. By the time Hannibal catches his breath, Will is already relaxing, smugness radiating from every inch.

“I was born to survive the pressures of the ocean floor and vortexes of a hurricane,” Will says, “of course I’m stronger than you.”

Laughter bubbles up in Hannibal’s chest, and he lets it fly without hesitation. He is soaked and his knees hurt and his shoulders ache, but nothing could be better than the sight of Will, proud and sleek and *beautiful*, true to himself in a way Hannibal could never have predicted.

Hannibal leans forward and kisses Will’s forehead. “You are gorgeous, my darling,” he breathes. “May I?”

Will readily extends his arms, his tail shifting and twitching between Hannibal’s legs, and Hannibal does his best to ignore the strange sensation of hard, cold scales against his pants as he looks at Will’s arms. The silver patterning glows as Will breathes, dimming as he exhales and brightening as he inhales, and all lead back to a central node in Will’s throat, which gleams like a diamond. However, when Hannibal leans closer, Will whips his tail up, and Hannibal stops when he feels the warning pinpricks of Will’s sharp spines on the back of his neck.

“Sensitive spot?” Hannibal asks.

Will bares his teeth, which now are capped with fangs. “That’s my Song,” Will says warily. “The source of my power. Humans used to hunt us for it, until they realized that once it was

removed and we died, the Songs crumbled to dust. But by then so many of us were dead that it didn't matter that they stopped."

"Is that why you came inland?"

Will tilts his head. "Yes and no," he answers. "A lot of us come to walk the earth now; it's part of becoming an adult. We learn your world so that you can never take us by surprise again. And sometimes . . . sometimes we have children here. It . . . helps diversify the gene pool."

And, well, with a comment like that, Hannibal can't help but look down. He sees no indication of genitalia in Will's tail, for the scales seem never ending in their overlapping. So instead he focuses on where skin ends and tail begins, and once it's clear his attention has shifted, he feels the spines of Will's tail move away as Will relaxes again.

The skin of Will's stomach is smooth under Hannibal's palm. He can feel no tangible difference, except that on one side of an invisible line there is skin and on the other there are softer, more flexible scales. He pets curiously, watching as Will shifts and twitches under his touch, and when he leans down even further, he can see more of those gleaming silver lines, flowing through Will's tail like strings of lights. They brighten and dim like Christmas lights on a timer, although the rhythm of Will's breathing, and that's when Hannibal sees it.

It's a tiny little thing, one small space where the scales part and do not overlap, leaving a tiny slit of actual flesh. It's the same color as the scales around it, purple-blue, and Hannibal wouldn't have even noticed it if it wasn't for the fact that the silver lines do not run through it as they run throughout the rest of Will. Instead, they encircle it, as though calling attention to those who know what to look for.

Hannibal moves his hand, sliding down from Will's waist to the little slit, and finds that it is soft, like the under bed of a nail once he is past the scales, and smirks when he hears Will make a noise.

"Hannibal – "

"And how exactly do you have children, Will?" Hannibal asks, running his nail up and down the slit, feeling how it is soft and tender like skin. "I assume there is a different method for this form than when you are in human form?"

Will groans, half of breath like he's run a marathon. "I – We – Different biology," he chokes out.

"Is that so?" Hannibal puts his weight onto Will's tail, pinning him as best he can against the bottom of the tub, and puts a little more pressure on the slit. "So if I were to keep rubbing you here, would I find – "

"Not that," Will snaps. His entire face is flushed now, his hands gripping the tub so tightly his knuckles are white, and although he writhes, Hannibal can't quite tell if he's trying to get away or come closer. "We're a – matriarchal society – I – the pods have a – a dominant female – and I – I'm the only one so – god, Hannibal, *stop* – "

“You could throw me off, if you wanted me stop,” Hannibal points out. “But here you are instead, letting me do what I want.”

Will snarls, thrashing underneath him, but the spines do not touch Hannibal and Will’s hands do not push him away. Hannibal presses even harder and watches in delight as the slit darkens in color, the blue-purple becoming black as night against the silver of Will’s rabbiting pulse.

“So, a dominant female,” Hannibal muses. “Might I find something else here, then?”

Will throws his head back with a whine. The tub cracks under his hands, until Will is left holding pieces of porcelain. “A – A uterus,” Will moans. “To carry – our young – *Hannibal* – ”

Hannibal can well imagine it – some other merman, face indistinct but body clear, twisting his tail around Will and locking his arms around Will’s neck, forcing himself inside to plant his seed, eking pleasured cries out of Will’s sweet mouth, claiming a place as the dominant male – and it makes a growl rise up out of his chest. He takes his free hand and plants it on Will’s chest, pressing him down against the tub, pinning him into place like he might any prey, baring his own teeth in answer when Will snaps at him.

“And how would you choose this . . . dominant male?”

Will’s eyes flash, and a thrumming sound emanates from his throat. The node at the center of his throat – his Song – brightens until it almost hurts to look at, and then the water in the tub rises like a tidal wave. It floats above, like gravity has turned upside down, droplets fleeing to the heavens, until Will jerks his hand and makes a guttural sound and the water splashes down upon Hannibal. It’s cold and it makes him gasp, but more importantly it feels like heavy ice, weighing down his shoulders. When Hannibal pushes back, Will makes a new sound, sharp and shrill, and the water goes from fluid to hard, ice encasing him from shoulder to hip, leaving only his head untouched.

Will grins, savage and unafraid. “By tide,” he says, sing-song. “A dominant female answers to no one, and allows only the strongest of mates. Those who desire her must chase her, and fight her, and hold tight, for she will call upon the tides themselves to throw them aside, and those who lose their grip became her next meal. Do you really think you’re stronger than the tide, Hannibal?”

“Will you eat me, if I lose?”

“In this form, yes, I will.” Will makes a soft sound, almost like a purr. “As I said: we seek to diversify the gene pool, but we only allow the strongest of mates. It takes strength to survive the deep sea storms and creatures of the trench. Not all of us live to majority.”

And, well, never let it said that Hannibal backed down from a challenge. He takes a deep breath and jerks backwards, shattering the ice around his hands, and from there it’s a few quick punches to break the ice upon his shoulders and knees. Will roils beneath him, the ocean brought to life in the tub, but Hannibal plants an arm across his chest and an elbow in

his throat, right against his Song, and puts his other hand back against Will's tail, right where he is soft and molten hot.

Will's Song dies in his throat, and he goes still as stone.

"Have you ever done this before?"

"No," Will says. "I was too young, before. And you had both of my children murdered."

"Would a dominant male suffer another to lie with his mate?"

"He wouldn't have a choice, if that was what the female wanted," Will replies. "Our pods are made of many, and we have no concept of monogamy the way humans do. We are together for a mating season, and then apart, and are just as likely to war with those who mated us last season as we are to take them as mates again."

Hannibal tsks. That won't do. "Let me rephrase: do you think I would suffer another to lie with you?"

"No," Will says softly. "But you would need to beat me first."

"Haven't I already?"

Will's answer is lost to a moan as Hannibal strokes him again, pressing inside, and Hannibal knows he's won. Will comes alive again under his arms, tearing at his clothes with those sharp nails, rendering his garments to scraps. He rears up and fastens his teeth to Hannibal's shoulder, and Hannibal lets loose a moan of his own as pain radiates from where Will's fangs pierced his skin.

"Hurry up and get inside me," Will snarls. "Or I'll tear you apart."

"Did you poison me?" Hannibal asks, because his heart is racing too fast for even this, this brutal coupling between species.

Will makes an impatient sound. "If I didn't, you wouldn't be able to keep up with me," he says tartly. "Our kind can mate for days, Hannibal, over and over among the tides. If you intend to mate me, you'll need the poison to keep you going."

"And then you can feast upon my corpse?"

"Don't be ridiculous; if I wanted you dead, I'd tear your throat out." He grabs Hannibal's back, his nails sinking into Hannibal's skin, and squeezes. "Now hurry up or I'll do it, and I won't care if you bleed down there."

The first thrust is awkward, because Hannibal has limited leverage and Will won't stop moving. The second thrust is better, Will softening and pushing back. The third thrust is like sinking into heaven, and Hannibal doesn't even care when Will bites him again, fangs going deep in his muscle.

The water rises again, like the tide, bashing against Hannibal, so strong he's sure that bruises will soon form, but Hannibal does not let himself be sidetracked or distracted or dislodged.

"You are mine," he tells Will, "and our children will be glorious."

Will frees his jaw only long enough to taunt him. "Only if your seed is strong," he says. "Why do you think most of us walk this earth as men?"

"Because none of them – had ever – met me," Hannibal replies, and thrusts even harder, until Will's song goes erratic and the water falls away, and all that is left is Will and Hannibal, human and merman, locked together in a struggle ancient as the sea.

When it's over, the tub is full of cracks, Hannibal has bruises from his shoulder to his knees, and Will is glowing like a nightlight. The bathroom floor is also full of water, which nearly makes Hannibal slip when he climbs out, but Will waves a lazy hand and sends it all flying towards the sink. Then he pushes himself upright, sliding out of the tub to land with a thump on the ground, humming softly to himself, and Hannibal gets a front row seat to the way his scales lighten and soften and fade away, like scabs falling off, until it's just Will again, human from his waist to his knees to his toes.

Will looks up, running a critical eye up and down Hannibal, and tilts his head. Breathes in. Licks his lips. "Round two? We can do it in a bed for your soft squishy human skin."

It almost makes Hannibal want to whimper, after so many unending rounds, so many of Will's bites littering his shoulders to send poison racing through his veins, so many orgasms that Hannibal isn't even sure if he can come.

Still, he remembers what Will said about the weak mates, so he straightens his shoulders. "What, that wasn't enough to satisfy you?"

Will shrugs and clambers to his feet. "I haven't done it the human way in a while. I'd like to try. I've still got my fangs, if you *need* the poison."

Just for that, Hannibal scoops him up and throws him onto the bed, to the beautiful sound of Will's laughter.

Six months later, when Will comes to him and says "So I need to leave", Hannibal's first thought is that the FBI has found them. He thinks it's a quite understandable reaction, but Will laughs so hard that he wheezes and the faucet explodes.

It's not the first time Will's Song has caused water explosions in their house, so Hannibal just turns off the water to the bathroom and dries himself and waits for Will to stop laughing.

"Humans have such short memories," Will says eventually, when he's regained control of himself. He steps closer, a purr rising in his throat, and takes one of Hannibal's hands. Hannibal lets him, thinking that Will is going to hold it or massage it, and is therefore taken

quite aback when Will instead places it against his stomach, rubbing gentle circles in an unmistakable gesture.

There is no visible bump, nothing to indicate anything at all, but Hannibal shivers all the same.

“Are you sure?”

Will rolls his eyes. “Of course I’m sure,” he says sharply. He takes a deep breath, one of his legs twitching, as if he yearns to transform and have his tail again. “I’ve been – I will need the ocean. To give birth. All of my kindred are drawn back home, when the time is close. I can’t spawn in this form, Hannibal.”

Hannibal thinks of the discrete medical bag he’s taken to carrying around – mostly for wounds gained on hunts – and of the boat he has purchased, large with a cabin and big enough to hold a family for months at sea.

Slowly, he nods. “Okay. I can pack, and take a leave of absence. How close are you?”

Will blinks at him. His mouth falls open in shock. “You can’t come with me,” he says blankly, surprise in every syllable.

“So I should leave you alone to give birth? To our children?”

“I can defend myself,” Will argues.

“I will not leave you alone, Will.”

“You can’t come with me,” Will repeats, softer now. He nestles close to Hannibal, his cold nose nudging against Hannibal’s throat, and makes a gentle sound. “We spawn in the deep oceans, Hannibal, where no predators can disturb us. And where no humans can find us. You’d never be able to swim so deep.”

“I can anchor above, and wait for your return.”

Will shakes his head. “By instinct, I will call upon the tides to defend me,” he says. “The storms would tear any ship apart.”

Hannibal tries to imagine it: waiting here at home, alone and worried, as Will retreats to a place he cannot reach to give birth to their children. It’s utterly unthinkable, unacceptable, unimaginable. He grips Will’s hand tighter and wraps his other arm around Will’s waist, pressing them so close that it’s almost enough to believe they are one creature, one heart and mind and body.

“So make me like you,” Hannibal murmurs. “Show me your world, Will. I would be at your side when our children come into this world.”

Somewhere in the distance, Hannibal hears the distinct sound of water gushing, but he ignores it. He maintains eye contact with Will, whose eyes are so wide they almost bulge out of his head, and holds tight to cut off Will’s attempts to pull away.

“You can’t be serious,” Will says.

“It’s not impossible, is it?”

“No, but – it’s so . . . risky,” Will admits. “There hasn’t been a successful transformation in *centuries*.”

“I’ve always been one to beat the odds.”

“This isn’t like you making the FBI chase its own tail,” Will says flatly. “This is – This is messing with birthright, with ocean and land, mortal and immortal. The most likely outcome is you exploding into tiny little pieces.”

“And the least likely?”

Will swallows. “You . . . becoming one of my kind.”

Hannibal sighs. He releases Will and lowers himself to his knees, until he is at eye level with Will’s stomach, where their children slumber. He kisses Will’s skin, smooth but for the scar where Hannibal once sliced him open, and tastes sea salt, from Will’s daily swims in the ocean outside. He thinks of Will, so beautiful with his tail and his spines and his Song, and imagines children who look just like him, and cannot imagine being parted from any of them for even a second.

“Then I will become one of your kind,” Hannibal says simply. “You will not be alone, Will, and neither will our children. Not in this life, or the next.”

Will calls him a multitude of swear words, and then storms off to fix whatever his Song has wrecked.

Three weeks later, on the full moon, Will drags Hannibal down to the beach and orders him to strip.

“We haven’t checked off skinny dipping, I suppose,” Hannibal muses, but Will dodges his hands and points again at the sand.

“*Strip*,” he repeats, aggravation in every inch of his body. “You can’t be wearing any human clothing during a transformation, or the clothing will be absorbed into your new form, and it’ll hurt like hell.”

Hannibal pauses with his pants halfway down to his ankles. Will has steadfastly ignored his repeated requests to transform him, and his surprise must be genuine upon his face, for Will’s expression softens. He comes closer and kisses Hannibal’s cheek, leaving behind cold droplets of sea water, and then backs away towards the waves, until his feet are submerged in the water.

“Strip,” Will says again. “Mother Ocean must know every part of you as you are, for if she rejects you, her waves will tear you apart.”

With that as his motivation, Hannibal shucks every article of clothing in shorter order. He folds them in neat bundles and leaves it on the sand, grateful that it is a warm night, and waits for Will to give his next instruction.

Will sheds his own clothing, throwing it behind him as it mean nothing, and then crooks his fingers at him, a smile upon his face.

Hannibal steps forward until he can wade into the sea, and he understands Will's smile as the icy water hits him. It takes all of his strength to keep going as the water bites into his legs, but he does for Will, who stands there nude and calm like he doesn't even notice the temperature. Will even backs up a few steps, so Hannibal ends up shin deep in water before Will finally lets him stop.

Or, at least, shin deep water for a second, because Will raises his arms, a hum rising in his throat, and the ocean pulls itself into a wave that gathers until it's taller than Will and Hannibal combined, with a sound like the roar of a plane. Will drops his hands forward and the wave rushes to follow, splashing over them both so that they both end up drenched and cold.

"Will," Hannibal growls.

Will shrugs. "Now you are blessed with Mother Ocean," he says with a wink.

Then Will makes a short noise, sharp and shrill, and reaches down towards the waves lapping at his feet. The water obeys his Song, droplets rising towards his finger, until they form a long blade that glistens under the moon. Will runs his other hand down the watery blade, and when he pulls it away, he has a knife of pure ice, clear as glass and hard as diamond. He raises it to eye level, turning it this way and that to search for flaws, and then he draws a line down his forearm without flinching, pressing deep so that blood flows.

"Don't interfere," Will says sharply, when Hannibal makes to step forward. "If you interrupt the ceremony, we'll need to start again, and we don't have time to wait for another full moon."

Hannibal settles with a grumble. Will cuts himself again, on his other arm, and then drops the knife onto the waves as he walks towards Hannibal. He dips his fingers in his blood to make a damp circle at Hannibal's throat, in the exact same position where Will's Song resides, and kisses the spot, smearing blood. Then he kneels, like a supplicant at an altar, and smears blood in a circle around Hannibal's legs, as if wrapping a ribbon to bind his legs together, before he kisses that too. Finally he rises, mouth stained with blood, to kiss Hannibal on the lips, and Hannibal tastes the salt of his beloved's blood and revels in it.

Will steps away then, a smile upon his face, and says, "Now you are blessed with my blood."

Hannibal looks down as the waves nip at his legs, but the blood Will smeared there does not wash away. Instead, it shines against the ocean, like rubies twinkling in the waves, as if tattooed upon his skin.

When Hannibal looks up again, Will is sitting cross legged in the ocean, the water lapping around his chest. The silver on his veins is starting to appear again, either due to the moonlight or Will back in the ocean where he belongs, but it means that Hannibal can at least see the slightest curve to Will's stomach, the only sign that betrays the children he carries inside. It settles something in Hannibal, for although he did not think Will was lying, it still is quite the sight to see visible proof of his seed taking root deep inside Will, where no one else has ever managed.

Will rolls his eyes. "Yes, yes, your seed was strong," he says briskly. "Quit thinking about me and focus, please. This last step is the hardest."

Hannibal dutifully schools his face.

Will takes a deep breath and puts both hands into the water, and this time when he Sings, Hannibal for the first time can tell that there are words in the Song. He can't make out the words, or perhaps they are beyond his understanding, but this is more than the simple Songs that make water freeze or rise to Will's command. Will is speaking now, to the ocean and the waves and the moon, and the water responds, rippling and bubbling around his fingers.

Something jumps out of the water, too quick for Hannibal's eyes to follow, but Will snatches it out of the air without even flinching. He folds his fingers around it, whispers a word, and then extends his fist to Hannibal. When Hannibal holds out his own hand, Will slides a little gasping fish into his palm. It's not big at all, a tiny minnow that is perhaps the size of his middle finger, but it wriggles and jumps and Hannibal holds on tight because he knows instinctively that he cannot let it go.

He also knows, somewhat less instinctively, what Will wants him to do.

"Bones and all?" he asks, a wry smile upon his face.

Will inclines his head. "Bones and scales and all," he answers. "So that you may be blessed with the ability to swim as we do."

Hannibal raises it to his mouth and tilts his head back. It struggles desperately, but Hannibal closes his eyes and drops it straight down his throat. It goes down, but very uneasily, and Hannibal has to fight not to gag as he feels the sensation of it sliding and wriggling down into has stomach.

Next, Will cups his hands in the waves and gives Hannibal white sea foam, skimmed from the tips of the water.

"Sea foam," Will says. "From our ancestor, the first among us who could take a human shape. This will allow you to walk in both worlds and carry the magic in our veins."

Hannibal swallows that too, grimacing at the bitterness of the sea salt, but at least it goes down easier.

Will puts his hands back in the water, letting it bubble up under his Song, but for the first time he hesitates, and does not bring it straight back up to offer to Hannibal. Hannibal does

not move, wary of disrupting the ritual, but he tilts his head, letting his body language reflect that which Will reads so easily.

“This is the hardest one of all,” Will says quietly. “There’s still to back out, Hannibal.”

Hannibal looks at the curve of Will’s stomach, and thinks of walking away, of returning to their home, of waiting weeks and months and maybe years until Will’s return, whenever their children are strong enough to brave the land. But it’s such a fleeting thought; he has come so far to leave Will now, even before he knew what Will truly was.

Hannibal shakes his head and holds out his hands. “There is nothing that could be harder than leaving you behind, my love.”

Will sighs and straightens his shoulders. This time, he stands, and wades close to present Hannibal with the final item.

A sea urchin.

A baby one, to be sure, small enough to fit in the cradle of Will’s palm, but one still possessing sharp spines and probably even sharper venom.

“Sea urchin,” Will says softly, “so that you may be blessed with our defense measures when magic fails. It is the last piece, if you still wish to set aside Mother Earth and embrace Mother Ocean. After this . . . there is no turning back. The soul and mind and body can only take so much change, and one transformation is usually more than they can bear easily.”

“You’ve already changed me,” is all Hannibal says.

Swallowing the sea urchin is hard. The spines scratch his mouth and burn all the way down his throat, sliding down centimeter by centimeter, and when Hannibal coughs he can taste blood, his and Will’s mixed together. The poison hits next, as the world starts to turn hazy, and Hannibal stumbles and falls to his knees. His stomach heaves, trying to eject the poison he’s so willingly swallowed, but nothing comes up except blood.

“Will,” Hannibal wheezes, but Will does not come to him. Will merely stands there, face torn, agony writ clear in his eyes, and raises his arms again.

The first wave Will calls up knocks Hannibal off his knees, and he tumbles face first into the sand, adding scratches on the outside of his face to match his torn up insides. When he pushes himself upright, a second wave throws him backward and his back hits the sand. The third wave fills his eyes and ears and mouth, and when he tries to rise to his feet, hands grab his neck and chest and push down hard, so that he inhales water instead of air.

Instinct drives Hannibal to fight, and so he does, kicking out and punching, but Will settles heavily onto his chest and does not move. The world grows dark and hot, Hannibal burning all over from the lack of oxygen and influx of poison, and his last sight is of Will, glossy with tears and glowing with power of his Song, as he drowns Hannibal beneath the waves.

And Hannibal thinks, *Oh, my beloved Will*, and passes out.

When Hannibal wakes up, he sees nothing but blackness, and at first alarm rises in him, for Will mentioned nothing about losing his senses, but then he feels the brush of something against his cheeks and he understands that he is blindfolded. When he feels the blindfold with his hands, it is soft and squishy, like seaweed, and therefore not at all difficult to peel away.

His first blink reveals only darkness.

His second, though, reveals a sight far more welcome: Will.

Specifically, Will in merman form, his tail gently swishing in the water, his veins glowing with silver, and the softest Song emanating from his throat. He has two shells in his hand, and he is moving them in a complicated pattern, like origami, except that wherever the shells go, strands follow, as if Will is weaving some kind of underwater blanket. The strands are silver too, like all of Will's magic, but after a few moments they dull and harden, becoming like blue glass.

Hannibal pushes himself upright, eager to reunite with Will, and promptly goes head over heels.

Or rather, as he gets his first good glimpse at his brand new appendage, head over tail.

Will's Song abruptly stops, although it's replaced by the peal of Will's laughter, and honestly the sound is just as enchanting.

"You don't have legs anymore, Hannibal," Will chides. Two strong thrusts of his tail gets Will from his seat to Hannibal, and he gently guides Hannibal upright again, eyes bright. "You have to make one concentrated movement with your tail to swim."

"I'll have plenty of time to learn, with you as my teacher," Hannibal says. He takes Will's hand and holds it close, marveling at the silver. "It worked, my love."

"Yes," Will says, soft as a butterfly's flight. "It worked. The first successful transformation in over a hundred years, with the blessing of Mother Ocean. Welcome to my world, Hannibal, for you have left Mother Earth behind forever."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "I thought we could shift shape."

"We can," Will acknowledges. "But it will take you time to learn how. And besides, even if you do walk on land with human shaped legs, you won't stop being a merman. You'll still have a Song in your heart, and sea foam in your veins, and water in your lungs. You are part of the ocean, and she will never be far from you. Now, come, near the light; you should see yourself."

Will tugs him up, and Hannibal lets him pull them through the water, like gliding through the air. Breathing water, he learns, isn't that different from breathing air, like his body learned the reflex when he drowned and no longer needs conscious input. Swimming takes a little more effort to learn, but Hannibal has mastered the swimming pool before, and the ocean is not so different. After a few tries, he can keep pace with Will easily.

They are in a deep, large cavern of some kind, with a small opening at the front – very defensible, Hannibal notes – and a much larger space at the end. The walls are stone, carved smooth by the water and perhaps Will's Song, and the floor is carpeted with soft moss and seaweed. Small lights dot the edge where the ceiling meets the wall, and when they get closer, Hannibal sees that they are in fact little sprites, darting about in bubbles of water that are held in translucent shells, like an underwater lava lamp. Either way, they give off more than enough light for Hannibal to get a good look at himself.

He has patterning just like Will, but his is deep red, like dried blood or crushed peppers. His tail is red too, but in an even darker shade, fading from red to purple to black, and tipped with the same kind of spines as Will's.

Will makes an amused sound when he bends to touch his spines. "Don't puncture yourself," he warns. "You haven't built up an immunity yet, so unless you want to be paralyzed for a day or two, I'd let it go."

"And my Song?"

Will taps at his chest, right underneath his throat. Hannibal can understand why Will nearly sliced his head off when he went for Will's Song, for he can feel the snarl in his throat at the pressure, so close to his weakest point.

"Red," Will says, a sly smile on his face. "Like blood. I should've known, really."

"Does the color have meaning?"

Will nods. He winds their tails together, seemingly not bothered by Hannibal's spines, and lifts Hannibal's hand to the light to contrast their patterning. "Silver is the moon," Will explains. "It gives me the Song of water: to command the waves and the tide and the sea. Red is the Song of temptation: of minds and souls and hearts, of bewitchment. It's very rare, ever since our cousins started dying out. Then again, most of the Songs are rare, nowadays. We used to have Songs for earthquakes and volcanos, but the war killed most of them. The Song of water is all we have left now."

"Will it work on you?"

Will snorts. "Why, you want to play with my mind?" After a moment, he says, "If you use it right, your Song can affect anyone. Child of Mother Earth or Mother Ocean. I don't know if it affects any of the children of Mother Sky, but we haven't seen any of those since the first war, if the legends are true."

It's a comforting thought, that Hannibal can use his voice to protect Will if necessary, but in some ways, it's also sad. He would have loved to raise a storm, the way Will can with a word and a hand.

Instead, he catches Will around the waist and presses a hand to his stomach. "How soon?"

Will shrugs. "It's my first time, so I'm not sure. Soon though. Could be days, could be weeks." He opens his mouth and scrapes his fangs against Hannibal's shoulder, not deep

enough to inject poison, but the sensation still makes Hannibal shiver. “You’ll know when it happens, trust me. I’ll probably try and kill you.”

“Is that a cue for me to hunt?”

“No, I’ve got plenty of meat. Although if you want to Sing a shark to come for dinner, I won’t be angry. But nesting mothers get very defensive. I wouldn’t see you as my mate; I’d see you as my enemy, and with my newly born children, I’d lash out to defend them.”

“Nothing would fill me with more joy,” Hannibal confesses, “than to bear the scars of you defending our children. I will gladly let you sharpen your claws upon me.”

“You might sing a different tune if I tear off your tail,” Will says dryly.

“Can you?”

“My mother ate my father. My biological one, anyways. My dad was one of the lesser males in the pod, so he grabbed me and swam for it. He said my mother tore my biological father in half, from shoulder to tail, and feasted on his flesh to sate the hunger from the long labor.” Will tilts his head, smiling slightly. “Try not to provoke me like that, please. It’d be nice to finally have sex underwater. It’s much easier, down here.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrow. “Why, Will, did you peek while I was unconscious?”

“I didn’t need to. I’m the dominant female of the pod, so you’re a male. The dominant one, if we gain any other members. And if I die, you’ll take my place as dominant female . . . unless one of our children manages to beat you into submission and force you out.”

“How brutal,” Hannibal says in delight.

He twines their tails closer together, so that the faint gap in their scales lines up, and moves until they rub together. Will shivers in his grasp, his eyes falling closed, and Hannibal does it again, and again, and again.

Hannibal leans close, until he can kiss Will’s ear, and tries to Sing. “Will you kill me now, if I attempt to seduce you?”

“I’m already pregnant.”

“That’s not a no.”

“You don’t know the first thing about sex underwater. Or even our kind of sex, for that matter.”

“I know that if I do this, you moan for me,” Hannibal points out. “I know that if I bite you, my poison would likely bring you pleasure. And I know that if I put my fingers right here – ”

Will thrashes, a sharp sound emanating from his throat, and a current slaps Hannibal in the face. It drives him straight into the wall with enough force that a human might break their back, but Hannibal feels only pleasantly winded, like he’s been punched very gently. When

he looks up, Will's eyes are bright and his Song is even brighter, thrumming in the darkness like the only light that matters. Will bears his teeth, flashing sharp fangs at Hannibal, and smooths a hand down his tail, as if attempting to calm himself.

"That's not how it's done down here," Will says playfully. "You owe me a chase, Hannibal, and a fight with the tides. Do you think you're fast enough to catch me, and strong enough to hold me, and powerful enough to survive me?"

"If I wasn't, would you have let me have you before?"

"Sentiment gets to even the best of us." Will flicks his tail, putting some distance between them, and does a lazy circle at the entrance of the cave. "Catch me, Hannibal, and prove your strength. Otherwise I'll let the tides rip you apart and feast upon your flesh and decorate the altar of Mother Ocean with your bones."

Heat rises in Hannibal's chest, like the poison that changed him, but this time it clears his senses instead of fogging them. He becomes aware of every thrum of sound, every brush of the current, every scent trail in the water, and he knows that every instinct in him will answer to Will, no matter where he flees.

Hannibal bows, swishing his tail in the water. "I'll give you a headstart."

"You may regret that," Will says, and with a burst of Song and a flick of his tail, he's gone too fast for even Hannibal's newly enhanced eyes to track.

And Hannibal grins, and scents the water, and begins to count down.

When he reaches zero, he lets his Song echo through the ocean, and gives chase after his beloved.

FINIS

End Notes

A/N: And Hannibal catches Will, and they have sex underwater, and eventually Hannibal masters the ways of the ocean and his Song in time for Will to give birth. The storms Will summons cause a ton of damage, above and below the water, but all ends well. Years and years later, they bring their children to shore and go hunting and live happily ever after (because my mermen are immortal because I said so).

Many thanks to Cinn for putting this together! I'd highly recommend checking out the rest of the work in #MerMads collection.

Find me @ Telegram as TheSilverQueen : Pillowfort as TheSilverQueen : Tumblr as thesilverqueenlady : Twitter as silverqueenlady : NewTumbl as thesilverqueen : Dreamwidth as thesilverqueenlady

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